

The Ukraine crisis has highlighted the limitations of Germany's 'more active' foreign policy approach

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German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier announced earlier this year that Germany would be pursuing a more active approach to foreign policy issues. [Julia Himmrich](#) writes that while this was an important break from the country's reluctance to become involved in foreign conflicts since the end of the Second World War, the on-going Ukraine crisis has revealed the difficulties in putting such an approach into practice. She notes that there have been substantial divisions within Germany over the country's policy on Ukraine and Russia, including within the governing grand coalition.



The escalating events in Ukraine have unveiled a subtle division in German foreign policy, which only a crisis involving the country's large eastern neighbour Russia could have exposed so dramatically. While the coordination on Crimea between Chancellor Merkel and her Social Democrat Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was lauded as particularly well synchronised, the resulting German policy toward Russia has been more cautious than its European and western partners might have wished for.

A closer look at the political debate on Crimea and Ukraine reveals the ambiguity of Germany's relationship with Russia and its own approach to foreign policy and international law. Few international crises have caused so many high profile politicians to voice their opinions and judgements. The positions range from denouncing Russia to showing understanding for Putin and blaming the West for the escalation of the conflict.

Earlier this year, the German grand coalition announced a more proactive foreign policy. Post-war Germany has been uncomfortable with military interventions and has often refrained from engaging more than its allies asked for in international conflicts. The ministers of the new CDU/CSU-SPD government called for greater action and participation in military interventions, such as the French led operations in Africa. However the political debate, which has erupted around the response to Russia, makes this transition to a more proactive policy appear very unlikely.



Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Credit: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Berlin and Moscow – it's complicated

Germany's high dependency on Russian energy and the close economic ties between Russia and German industry are often seen as the main reasons behind the country's more moderate approach towards Putin in the past decade. Former chancellor Gerhard Schröder's appointment to a major role in the Russian consortium Gazprom, following his defeat in the 2005 German elections, also raised eyebrows at home and abroad, leading to a more cynical approach from commentators toward German-Russian relations.

Germany's relationship with Russia goes deeper, however, and is more ambiguous. Having been on opposite sides

in two World Wars, Germany's foreign policy in the after-war period became defined by its *Ostpolitik*, aimed at normalising relations between the then West German state and eastern Europe. Germany focused on engaging Russia and the socialist German Democratic Republic throughout the Cold War. After 1989 and Germany's unification, the German government under chancellor Helmut Kohl pressed for the eastern enlargement of the European Union, which was linked to the expansion of NATO.

The more hesitant EU partners might not have been willing to support the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 had it not been for Germany's willingness to fund it. Much of what was perceived as 'encirclement' of Russia by the EU and NATO was thus driven by a German pursuit of security and stability in its own neighbourhood. However Germany has always been keen to keep Russia at the table when it comes to international negotiations, although often with little success. Foreign Minister Steinmeier is the primary European voice calling for talks between Russia and Ukraine to resolve the current crisis.

The fallout from Kosovo

Germany's own actions in Kosovo also linger in the background of the debate over the Ukraine crisis. The German participation in NATO's bombing campaign in Yugoslavia in 1999, under Schröder's Social Democrat-Green government, remains problematic. Almost a decade after the deployment of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the territory declared its independence in 2008, with support from the United States and several EU members, including Germany. Kosovo is still unrecognised by Serbia, permanent UN Security Council members Russia and China, and five EU member states (Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, and Cyprus).

With respect for international law and the rejection of military action forming key aspects of German foreign policy, the wars in the Balkans had important ramifications for the foreign policy identity the country had worked hard to establish. The case of Kosovo forced Germany to undermine its own principles, against the interests of Russia, and while there has been an attempt to hide behind the unique nature of the case, the frequent references to Kosovo during the Crimea crisis have rubbed salt into a particularly sore wound for Germans.

Schröder and former chancellor Helmut Schmidt, both outspoken Social Democrats not shy of causing controversies, have made public statements to the effect that the behaviour of Putin is understandable. While Schröder [called](#) the Crimean referendum and Russian annexation illegal, he also drew a direct parallel with western policy on Kosovo – in the process admitting that both the NATO bombing in 1999 and independence of Kosovo in 2008 were not backed by international law.

Tensions in the grand coalition

In contrast to his retired colleagues, Foreign Minister Steinmeier has been notably wary in his approach. Ministers and members of Merkel's CDU party have been outspoken against Putin and last week criticised Steinmeier's stance on Russia as 'dangerous'. Steinmeier had called for a more moderate approach from the EU, to avoid forcing states such as Ukraine into de facto ultimatums over whether to side with the EU or Russia. For his conservative critics, this approach avoids recognising Putin as the main perpetrator of the conflict and raises unnecessary questions about Germany and the EU's own actions.

CDU Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, speaking to a group of students, made a [comparison](#) between the ambitions of Putin in Crimea and Hitler's seizing of the Sudetenland in 1938. Such an association is almost unheard of in the German political context, where comparisons to the Third Reich are generally understood as a trivialisation of the crimes of the Nazi Regime.

While the chancellor distanced herself from the statement, it is clear that some sections of the CDU are eager to counter the moderate foreign policy approach pursued by Merkel and Steinmeier. Such positions are, however, more geared toward the domestic conservative audience and are unlikely to influence the chancellor directly.

A divided opposition

The governing parties are not the only ones who are divided. The small parliamentary opposition, composed of the Greens and Die Linke (The Left), also have fundamental disagreements over Germany's relationship with Russia.

Die Linke has been the only party to publically condone Putin's behaviour and vilify the revolution in Ukraine, although the other German parties have largely pushed Die Linke to the side-lines when it comes to the party's foreign policy positions. The now retired Green politician Joschka Fischer, who served as the country's Foreign Minister from 1998 to 2005, once split his traditionally pacifist party during the Yugoslav conflict in 1999; but in contrast to Schröder, he has defended the operations in the Balkans and come out supporting a harder line from the EU against Putin and Russia.

The 'new' foreign policy – wishful thinking?

Merkel and Steinmeier have high expectations placed on them by NATO and Germany's EU partners. While it is true that Berlin has been able to keep communications open with Moscow, it looks increasingly unlikely that they are going to use this position to take a proactive role in putting Putin under pressure. Merkel has expressed public resentment toward Putin and acknowledged that economic sanctions on Russia would have negative consequences for German industry.

Steinmeier, meanwhile, has been busy calling for an international 'Contact Group' for Ukraine, and for closer co-operation with Poland, a country which also has a more complex relationship with Russia than most western states. The Merkel-Steinmeier duo have nevertheless been extremely careful to portray themselves as the driving force in dealing with Putin.

Undoubtedly, the situation in Ukraine touches on several hot-button issues in Germany's foreign policy debate. At home, visions of the country's foreign policy and relationship with Russia are increasingly polarised. The case of Ukraine shows that the 'new' German approach, with its greater emphasis on ambitious actions abroad, is difficult to realise in practice.

German foreign policy is still fundamentally framed in terms of the country's wider identity, with navel-gazing taking prominence over coherent action. As frustrating as this might be for Germany's allies, it does not mean that the country should be regarded as an unreliable partner, but rather that the announcement of a more 'active' German foreign policy should be regarded with moderation.

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About the author

Julia Himmrich – LSE, International Relations

Julia Himmrich is a PhD candidate in the International Relations department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interest lies in European and German Foreign policy, particularly in regard to humanitarian and military interventions in civil conflict. Her PhD research focuses on Germany's role in the independence and recognition of Kosovo in 2008. She is both a German and Italian citizen and has lived, worked and studied in Europe and Asia.

